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ABSTRACT

In September 1999, a pilot program of Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) was introduced in 15 local education authorities (LEAs) in England to provide payments to students aged 16-19 who are from low-income families and who are attending full-time courses in schools and colleges. Participants are entitled to 2 years' support and must be following a full-time course. The program requires that participating students, parents, and colleges sign learning contracts detailing students' learning program, agreed learning goals, and homework and attendance requirements. The pilot program has revealed several issues associated with EMA planning, monitoring, and program design; student support; and transition. The experience of the first stage of the pilot program indicates that early involvement with LEAs in planning the arrangements for EMAs in an area will be vital. Although EMA recipients have generally accepted the tough monitoring of their adherence to their learning contract, the need to report unauthorized absences has created problems for college systems. EMAs appear to have increased low-income youths' participation in postcompulsory education. Four of the new EMA pilots will focus on home-to-college transport. Other issues identified include the need for colleges to publicize the program better and assist students with applications. (MN)

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Education Maintenance Allowances

The impact on further education

S. Bourne

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Introduction

1. In September 1999, the government introduced a pilot programme of Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) in 15 local authority areas. The scheme involves payments to students aged 16–19 from low income families who are attending full-time courses in schools and colleges. The overall aim of the pilots is to see whether participation and achievement can be raised by a scheme that directly addresses the financial problems of potential learners.

2. On 30 March 2000, the Secretary of State announced a major extension of the scheme. A further 40 LEA areas will be included in the pilot, with the result that some 30% of 16 year olds will be in a pilot area. Since the areas chosen are those where financial hardship is most widespread – mainly the inner cities and metropolitan areas – an even greater percentage of potential recipients will be reached. The scheme will therefore impact upon most colleges in England and almost all of those in the major English conurbations.

3. Since the start of the pilot scheme, FEDA has been working with a group of colleges to help assess the impact upon learners and institutions. The FEDA research is designed to complement a major DfEE evaluation exercise, which is being carried out by the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRISP) at Loughborough University. Although it is too early to reach final conclusions on the impact of EMAs on achievement – the first cohort have not yet finished their first year – there are nevertheless clear messages for colleges, and for the DfEE about the impact of the scheme.

Background

4. The scheme is planned to run over three years. Each student is entitled to two years' support, so the original pilots will cover two full cohorts. The scheme covers 15 local authority areas, although four neighbouring LEAs in South London are sometimes considered together, giving a total of 12 schemes.

   To qualify for an EMA a young person must live in a pilot area and be in the relevant year group. Only 16 year olds received awards this year, though as they progress to year two the scheme will cater for a mixture of 16 and 17 year olds. They must be following a full-time course, though the establishment attended can be a school or college and does not itself have to be in an EMA area.

Region	Proposed new areas	Existing EMA areas
Merseyside	**Liverpool, Knowsley, Halton, Wirral, St. Helens.**	
West Mids	**Sandwell, Birmingham, Coventry, Wolverhampton, Worcestershire.**	Walsall, Stoke on Trent
Yorks & Humber	**Kingston upon Hull, Bradford, Sheffield, Barnsley, Wakefield, North East Lincolnshire.**	Leeds (currently restricted - new money will extend EMAs to whole cohort) Doncaster
London	**Newham, Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Haringey, Islington, Camden, Hammersmith & Fulham, Brent, Waltham Forest, Ealing, Barking & Dagenham, Wandsworth.**	Lambeth, Lewisham, Greenwich, Southwark (all currently restricted -new money will extend EMAs to whole Cohort)
North East	**Sunderland, South Tyneside, Hartlepool, North Tyneside, Northumberland.**	Gateshead, Middlesbrough
North West	**Salford, Manchester, Wigan, Tameside.**	Oldham, Bolton
South East	**Luton.**	Southampton
East Mids	**Leicester City.**	City of Nottingham
Eastern	**Suffolk.**	
South West		Cornwall

The above table shows LEAs already involved in the EMA pilot scheme, as well as proposed new areas for the extension of the scheme.

5. The allowance is based on parental income. The full allowance is paid to students with a parental income of under £13,000 per year; the amount tapers off until a maximum income of £30,000 is reached. Evidence of parental income is assessed by the LEA in a similar way to the process for HE awards. The EMA payment is not taken into account when calculating a family's benefit entitlement. There is some evidence from FEDA research that the take-up is lower among those families with incomes towards the top of the scale. As it is a pilot, a variety of payment levels exist. In general there is a weekly allowance of £30 (in some areas £40), a termly bonus for full attendance (normally £50 but in some cases £80) and a final bonus paid on successful completion (normally £50 but in some cases £140). The scheme embodies the 'something for something' philosophy to which the government is increasingly committed.

6. A key part of the scheme is the learning contract that has to be signed by the student, a parent (or carer) and the college. The contract includes details of the learning programme, agreed learning goals, and homework and attendance requirements. Breach of the learning contract results in payments for the week in question being stopped, and jeopardises the termly bonus. Early evidence suggests that the tough regime improves attendance, but raises hard questions for college organisation.

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Planning issues

7. The experience of the first stage pilots suggests that early involvement with LEAs in planning the arrangements for EMAs in an area will be vital. LEAs are responsible for the scheme, but they are expected to bring together representatives of the other stakeholders in a planning group. In some areas this has worked well and strengthened relationships between colleges and LEAs. In a few it has worked badly, resulting in incomplete information being given and applicants not hearing until late in the day.

8. Among the issues which colleges will need to focus on are:

   - *Publicity material*: Is it clear and learner focused? Some early examples are bureaucratic and full of jargon
   - *Application forms*: Are they freely available? Some LEAs have restricted their availability, which has not been helpful
   - *Completing forms*: Although the decision on whether to accept an application is made by the LEA, college staff may be involved in advising potential claimants on form filling. College staff need to be aware that in respect of EMAs, income from absent parents is taken into account
   - *Guidance*: Are the arrangements for informing potential students impartial? There is some evidence that if left to schools, information given can be incomplete
   - *Appeals*: The LEA administers the scheme on behalf of the DfEE and makes the decisions on eligibility. The procedure for appeals needs to be spelt out
   - *Staff security*: As parents, not students, are generally the ones appealing against non-payment, staff dealing with potentially irate parents should not be isolated from colleagues.

9. There is a particular need to encourage those LEAs in neighbouring areas to collaborate at the planning stage. FE students often cross LEA boundaries and there needs to be consistent and clear information for them.

Monitoring

10. Key features of the new EMA regime are the monitoring of students' adherence to their learning contract and the reporting of cases to the LEA where payment should be suspended. This tough regime has, in general, been accepted by recipients and there is some evidence that it has worked to improve attendance and completion of assignments. In some cases, however, it has been a cause of difficulty – and, in many cases, the need to report unauthorised absences has created problems for college systems. Among the key learning points from the first round pilots are:

    - The need to simplify and standardise arrangements for reporting unauthorised absence to LEAs. A list of those from whom payments should be withheld should be enough, although some LEAs ask for a full list of all recipients to be returned. **In areas where several neighbouring LEAs will now be administering EMAs, early agreement on a common format for reporting will be essential** to minimise the administrative load on colleges
    - The need to set in place arrangements to collect data on absences systematically and consistently across the college. This requires a common understanding of what is an authorised absence and what is meant by 'late'. **It would not be acceptable for one student to lose £30 for being 10 minutes late when a student in another class suffered no penalty for missing 15 minutes.** There needs to be agreement on when an absence is 'authorised'
    - There is a need to have an efficient system to collect, check and summarise absence data. Most LEAs require returns by a Tuesday in order to pay on the Friday, one week in arrears. In a large metropolitan college, where EMAs might apply to a majority of 16 year olds, this could well mean extra staff are required. **The pilot colleges report that EMAs are at least 10 times as demanding as Access Fund payments to administer** (largely because of the weekly reporting)
    - The need to separate the processing of EMAs and absence data from the student welfare function. Pilot colleges report concern that **if Student Services are seen as the ones who stop students' payment, they may not be seen as a source of much needed help and impartial advice**.

Programmes

11. There is some evidence that EMAs have increased participation in full-time education in the pilot areas. The DfEE in announcing the extension of the pilots refers to increased participation and one of our pilot colleges reported that in their LEA the number of 16 year olds in full-time education had increased substantially – from 48% in 1998 to 64% in 1999. It is not clear how far this might represent a transfer of young people from the work-based route. The DfEE research should shed some light on this important issue.

12. Students in receipt of EMAs seem to be recruited to programmes at all levels. In some colleges in our sample a majority of students were at level 3; in others they were spread evenly across the range. In the first group of 2080 analysed, 48% were studying at level 3, 31% at level 2 and 21% at level 1. Further analysis would be useful to ascertain how many of those who are eligible for EMAs through means testing also come from wards that attract the 'widening participation factor'. This would provide evidence to inform discussion about whether the widening participation factor for colleges should change – from being based on deprived areas using postcodes, to being based on prior educational attainment. A substantial number of those in receipt of EMAs, by definition from financially disadvantaged families, would not attract the widening participation factor were lack of prior educational attainment, defined as not possessing five GCSE grades A–C by the age of 16, to be the key (as modelled in FEFC Circular 00/07).

13. A serious potential weakness of EMAs is that students are currently restricted to two years' support. This model works well for those who enrol on advanced level programmes at 16 – the A-level and advanced GNVQ group. It does not fit the large number of learners for whom a year at intermediate or even foundation level is the appropriate next step. Yet this group represents at least half of all those currently receiving EMAs in colleges – and would be expected to be a priority group for the allowances. Unless there is a change when the full scheme is rolled out, the consequences could be:

    - That students who enrol at level 3 after a year's preparation on lower level programmes will lose financial support halfway through their course
    - Students not really ready for advanced level study at 16 will be pressured to overreach themselves to secure financial support.

14. Students receiving EMAs will, by definition, be full-time students and eligible for the entitlement curriculum associated with Curriculum 2000. The two initiatives might be mutually reinforcing. There is some evidence from the pilots that students in receipt of EMAs are under less pressure to get a part-time job and thus have more time to devote to their study. This conflicts with the messages from FEDA's *Learning and earning* project[1], however, in which many young people said that they would continue to work even if an allowance were available to them. Further analysis is needed about how to interpret these conflicting findings.

15. One issue for colleges to consider is how to handle the attendance monitoring arrangements in the context of an enrichment programme. While participation in an enrichment programme is not just optional for anyone for whom the entitlement package is claimed, it may be difficult to provide the evidence of participation with the frequency and speed required for EMAs.

16. The EMA arrangements seem to be predicated on programmes that involve attending classes from Monday to Friday. Colleges should be prepared for difficulties in relation to patterns of provision that depart from this model. For example, in some areas there have been difficulties arranging payment for part-weeks. If, for example, terms start on a Wednesday and end on a Tuesday, neither part-week counts. In the same way, some colleges have experienced difficulties in continuing payments when formal classes cease for the examination period. Reading weeks have been a cause of students losing their allowance. Colleges may be encouraged to reconsider the use of reading weeks in the light of the difficulties caused to learners receiving EMAs.

17. While the DfEE takes a constructive approach to all these issues, they appear difficult to resolve on the ground.

Student support issues

18. The provision of EMAs impacts upon other arrangements for student support at the college. An issue already mentioned is the desirability of separating those responsible for student guidance from those who monitor the students' programmes. In financial terms, the numbers of students potentially eligible for EMAs will be taken into account when calculating the college Access Fund allocation – EMA students will not be eligible for Access Fund support, except for emergency loans.

19. An emerging feature of the EMA pilots is the perceived success of the scheme in improving attendance and retention. One college reports a retention rate of 98% among the 246 EMA holders; another reports a rate of 92% as against a college average of 85%. If it is the case that EMAs are enabling colleges to improve retention, the question arises as to whether other forms of financial support should similarly be conditional.

20. The introduction of the pilots has meant that students in apparently similar circumstances receive different levels of support. This will be a particular issue in the pilot phase (and in any event is nothing new for colleges used to the discretionary award regime). In the first pilot sample, some colleges have taken the decision to use college funds and Access Funds to minimise the differences between students (for example, by paying a similar allowance to second year students or those from outside the area). In these cases they have taken the opportunity to make payments subject to the same conditions as EMAs.

21. Four of the new EMA pilots will focus on transport. The DfEE has recognised not only the key role that transport can play in supporting participation, but also the potential complexity of the issue. The need for transport support is affected not just by parental income but also by the location of the student's home and the pattern of transport. FEDA is currently undertaking an enquiry into home-to-college transport, which may help provide useful background information to shape the pilots and subsequent schemes. In the short term, however, colleges near to the four transport pilots – in Worcester, Suffolk, Sunderland and north-east Lincolnshire – need to be aware that arrangements there will cut across existing patterns of support.

Transition issues

22. Colleges need to be aware that in the first year of the extended EMA pilots, things will not always go smoothly. In the first phase pilots there was substantial variation between LEAs in the efficiency with which arrangements were put into place. Many students who were eligible for an EMA from September onwards were not aware of their eligibility, or did not receive a payment until Christmas or later. Among the issues for colleges to consider are:

- The possible need for hardship loans from college Access Funds to tide students over until an EMA is processed
- The need to help publicise the availability of EMAs through college channels as well as the official publicity
- The need to assist students with applications for EMA support, particularly if the process appears complex
- If approval notifications for EMA students arrive well after the start of term, colleges will need to undertake retrospective checks on attendance. Therefore colleges will need to ensure that their registers are kept accurately.

Research findings

23. FEDA will be publishing a full report of the survey of colleges that Denis McAteer carried out in January and February 2000. It contains a more detailed discussion of the administrative issues that colleges are facing, and will be helpful for those institutions that will have a significant involvement with EMAs for the first time in September 2000. The project is planned to continue and it will increasingly focus on the impact of the scheme from the perspective of the learner. For further information about the project please contact Mick Fletcher or Denis McAteer at FEDA, Tel: 01823 345950, e-mail: mfletche@feda.ac.uk
In May, FEDA expects to publish the first results from its enquiry into student transport, which will be available from the same points of contact.

Notes

1. *Learning and earning*, research report by Peter Davies. ISSN 1461 2712. Available from FEDA publications, priced £5, and as a read-only file on the FEDA website – www.feda.ac.uk

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On 30 March 2000, the government announced plans to extend its Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) programme. The scheme involves payments to students aged 16–19 from low income families who are attending full-time courses in schools.

Since the start of the pilot scheme, FEDA has been working with a group of colleges to help assess the impact of EMAs upon learners and institutions. This document summarises the key research findings and highlights issues of importance for colleges.

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